

Mexico

In the center of Mexico City, near the *Paseo de la Reforma*, there is a very unusual plaza. In and of itself it offers a display of the major periods of Mexico's history. It is called *La Plaza de Tres Culturas* (The Plaza of Three Cultures). In the center are the ruins of an Aztec pyramid, on one side is a church built by the early Spaniards, and in the background are the new, modern structures of Mexico City. The history of Mexico is basically divided into these three eras: the ancient period before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Colonial Period when Spain ruled the land, and the modern period after Mexico won its independence. There is no other place in Mexico where one can see the combination of these three epochs, side by side.

The most famous of the Pre-Columbian civilizations in Mexico, the Aztecs and the Maya, were themselves preceded by a large and powerful civilization that influenced their way of life. The Olmecs were the first high civilization to develop in Mesoamerica (the fertile region that runs through the south of Mexico and into Central America) from 1200 to 100 B.C. They built cities, developed an early calendar and used hieroglyphics as their written language in the area surrounding present day Veracruz.

The Maya flourished for hundreds of years in the area of the Yucatan Peninsula and built fantastic cities there. They were

mathematicians, astronomers and priests with strong ties to nature and the stars. But they had reached the peak of their civilization (~900 A.D.) long before Columbus discovered America. The Spaniards arrived to find the second, less powerful Mayan empire already in decay. They destroyed many of the cities and all but four of the thousands of books written by the Maya, called Codices, because they considered them to be the work of the devil.

Starting in 100 A.D. and growing throughout the Classical period (the same time as the first Maya Empire), another great city was built near present day Mexico City.

Teotihuacán was a city of 150,000 at its peak and dominated by the huge Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, but for unknown reasons the Teotihuacánes abandoned their city and temples in the ninth century.

In the 1200's, a tribe known as the Aztecs entered the valley that now holds Mexico City. At this time it was very green and fertile, and filled with lakes. Ancient Aztec legend says that their god, *Huitzilopóchtli*, told them to search until they found an eagle sitting on a cactus while eating a snake. Here they must build a city to honor him. The Aztecs found that eagle perched on an island in the middle of a lake and they built the great city of *Tenochtitlan*. The island it was built on was connected by three bridges to the mainland and crops were grown on floating fields to support the people. The Aztecs raised huge armies to protect their valley and city and to conquer outlying tribes for blood sacrifice to *Huitzilopóchtli*. One Aztec god, *Quetzalcóatl*, never required sacrifice but legend has it that he was driven out by other more bloodthirsty deities. *Quetzalcóatl* left and headed east on

the back of a flying serpent, but vowed to return one day and rule all of Mexico. He even named the date of his return, *Ce Acatl* (One Reed). In the Aztec calendar this date coincided with the European calendar year of 1519. This legend would be at the center of the Aztec destruction by the Spanish.